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Continued multilingual development, maintenance and enrichment of the United Nations web site

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 55/136 B, the General Assembly encouraged the Secretary-General to continue his efforts to develop and enhance the United Nations web sites in all the official languages of the Organization, and requested him to continue to develop proposals for consideration by the Committee on Information at its twenty-third session, keeping in mind the building of modular parity, which should ultimately lead to achieving full parity among the official languages of the United Nations.

II. Background

2. The Committee on Information considered the first report on this issue (A/AC.198/1999/6) at the first part of its twenty-first session, in May 1999. The follow-up report requested by the Committee (A/AC.198/1999/9) was considered at its resumed twenty-first session, in November 1999. A subsequent report (A/AC.198/2000/7) was requested by the Committee on Conferences and was considered by that Committee as well as by the Committee on Information at its twenty-second session. The present report provides an update on the development of the United Nations web site, as well as future development plans for the site.

III. Update of the United Nations web site

3. The Internet revolution has opened up new opportunities for delivering the United Nations message directly to the world at large, without the need to depend on intermediary disseminators. The new medium, used in conjunction with traditional means of distribution, has dramatically extended the reach of the United Nations message to all corners of the world. It is also being used as a vehicle to carry traditional printed messages and radio broadcasts at a fraction of the former cost. As the use of the Internet increases, the reach of the United Nations message will become much wider, while the dissemination cost per unit will also drop sharply.

4. The United Nations web site has continued to grow during the past year at a phenomenal pace. The Department of Public Information has been able to keep up with the ever-increasing task of development, maintenance and updating through the use of creative techniques to automate routine maintenance tasks. This has enabled staff to devote more time to the enhancement of the site. The United Nations web site

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now transfers daily nearly 12 gigabytes (about 12 billion bytes) of information and registers more than 3 million hits a day from more than 159 countries. This tremendous growth in the use of United Nations web sites is evidenced by the increase in the number of hits from 489,000 in January 1996 to more than 71 million in December 2000. In 2000, more than 488 million hits were recorded, which is equivalent to serving 15.4 files every second every day. The raw number of accesses to a web site sometimes portrays an inflated usage level. However, the Department has undertaken a detailed analysis of web site usage that shows the number of actual documents retrieved and viewed by users, based on which it is estimated that an average of 370,000 documents are currently viewed by users each day.

5. On 1 September 2000, a completely redesigned web site was launched simultaneously in all six languages of the Organization. This was a major step toward parity among the official languages, by providing a "splash page" in which the user chooses the language and is presented with similar-looking pages in each of the languages. Navigation through the site has been made much simpler, with additional cross-links and a more intuitive interface. New material continues to be added in all official languages. Since September 2000, a total of 10,880 documents and information materials has been added in languages other than English and French. For the first time, in addition to the web cast, all statements made to the General Assembly during the Millennium Summit and the subsequent general debate at the fifty-fifth session were uploaded to the site. All provisional verbatim records of the General Assembly are now available online. Web casts and the uploading of statements will become regular features of the United Nations web site in the near future.

IV. Future development

6. Among the new additions to the site are the web pages for the annual report of the Secretary-General on the work of the Organization; the opening of the fifty-fifth session of the General Assembly; the United Nations Fund for International Partnerships; the Millennium Summit treaty event; the Messengers of Peace and Goodwill Ambassadors event; United Nations Day 2000; the Security Council meeting on women; peace and security; the United Nations World Television Forum 2000; the International Convention against Transnational Organized Crime; the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations; World AIDS Day 2000; the Fourth International Conference on New and Restored Democracies; Human Rights Day 2000; the 10-year review process of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development; the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission; and the high-level international intergovernmental event on financing for development.

7. While multilingual development, maintenance and enrichment of the United Nations web site has been at the forefront of the Internet activities of the Department of Public Information, progress has been slower than expected due to a lack of in-house expertise and resources in the non-working languages of the Secretariat. Furthermore, as indicated in an earlier report (A/AC.198/2000/7), it is also vital that the issue of public information content creation be separated from the issue of ongoing maintenance, coordination and management. Until those two issues — content creation and ongoing maintenance, coordination and management — are dealt with, the realization of a truly equal multilingual web site will remain elusive.

8. The Department of Public Information wishes to reiterate that in order to ensure the regular maintenance and enhancement of the web site it needs a sound foundation in terms of staffing and resources. To that end, some measures have already been taken within existing resources, but further development of the web site will require additional allocations. Accordingly, the Department believes that the feasibility study called for in an earlier report (A/AC.198/2000/7) will still need to be undertaken in order to ascertain the requirements with respect to staffing, technology and content for the true multilingual development of the United Nations web site.

9. In order to achieve significant progress in the multilingual development of the web site, the issue of content creation and development will need to be dealt with on an organizational basis. At present, official documentation is created in various Secretariat locations, using different formats. The Steering Committee on Reform and Management, led by the Deputy Secretary-General, has requested an organization-wide review of the information and communications technology policy, including content management. With the adoption of uniform policy, it can be expected that procedures will be streamlined

and many of the diverse methods of document production will be harmonized. The Steering Committee dealt extensively with the issue of coherence of information, both within the Secretariat and for the benefit of the public. It identified the need for a United Nations policy to satisfy requirements concerning: (a) availability of documents (coherent and stringent implementation of standards for, inter alia, formats and metadata); (b) integrity of data (data to be captured only once, classification schemes strictly applied, authenticity of documents); and (c) confidentiality (access rules and mechanisms, security of access, security for data modifications).

10. In 2000, the Publications Board finalized and adopted an administrative instruction on electronic publications which lays down policy guidelines for the United Nations presence on the Internet. The guidelines deal with content planning, responsibility, domain names and publications policy. Following a review by the Office of Legal Affairs, the guidelines will be issued as an administrative instruction (ST/AI/2001/---). The guidelines provide for the establishment of a working group on Internet matters, involving all content providing offices. Once the guidelines have been widely disseminated and utilized, it can be expected that United Nations Internet publishing will be better coordinated and more consistent. In particular, the working group will consider, on a regular basis and with the participation of all departments, content-related matters, such as duplication of materials, and will oversee overall adherence to the guidelines.

V. Proposals

11. To date, six proposals for the further development of the United Nations web site have been presented to the Committee on Information for its consideration, each of which has involved the allocation of additional resources for the multilingual development, maintenance and enrichment of the United Nations web site. Further proposals could continue to be developed. However, given the constraints imposed by a zero-growth budget and the fact that such proposals would also entail significant resource requirements, much of the future development and enhancement of the web site will depend on policy decisions by the General Assembly with regard to making official documents available in all languages free of charge. In addition, decisions regarding the gradual development of the various language components will be necessary. It should be noted, however, that regardless of any such decisions the gap between the English and the other language sites will continue to grow. Therefore, efforts to ensure total language parity are bound to become more challenging and at the same time more resource-intensive.

12. In earlier reports to the Committee on Information (A/AC.198/1999/6 and A/AC.198/2000/7), it was reiterated that initial consideration by the Committee and the General Assembly should lead to the establishment of a sound footing for regular maintenance and enhancement, the two basic criteria of any successful web site. Therefore, the proposal presented in document A/AC.198/2000/7, annex, continues to represent the minimum resource requirement to that end.

13. Accordingly, it is proposed that current efforts be continued and that greater emphasis be accorded to automation techniques, taking advantage of the ongoing improvement of technology. The Information Technology Section in the Office of the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, which manages the United Nations web site, has been restructured to focus on the development of the language sites, and includes a team for each language.

14. During 2001, it is expected that all resolutions and decisions of the General Assembly and the Security Council, as well as those of the Economic and Social Council, will be made available through the web site at no charge. However, in order to provide additional parliamentary documentation, guidance from the General Assembly is necessary in view of its resolution 51/211 F, in which it indicated that parliamentary documentation be made available on a fee-for-service basis determined by associated costs.

15. The Department of Public Information will continue to develop special web pages to mark important days and events, and to work with substantive offices to develop sites for major United Nations conferences and special sessions of the General Assembly. To the extent possible and practical and subject to the availability of material in the various languages, all efforts will be made to present such sites in the six official languages.

16. The Department of Public Information has undertaken the task of identifying specific portions of the main English language site for rendition in each of the other official languages. Each language site is scheduled to be enhanced in small modules. The first effort in that direction is to make General Assembly and Security Council resolutions available on the site in all official languages. The Department wishes to express its gratitude to the Government of Spain for providing an associate expert for the development of the Spanish site and to the International Organization of la Francophonie for providing an expert to work on the French site. Those contributions are expected to have a positive impact on the additional development of the French and Spanish sites over the next two years.

17. The policy issues concerning the question of making all public information available in all official languages will be examined through an interdepartmental working group.

18. Although textual content will remain the primary focus, multimedia content will continue to be developed, which will contribute to expanding the audience of the live United Nations Radio project, as well making photographs more readily available.

19. The search capacity on the United Nations web site has already been dramatically improved by migrating all press releases into a database-driven system. It is proposed that, following further testing and fine-tuning, that system be gradually introduced to the remainder of the web site, thereby significantly reducing maintenance requirements and at the same time cutting development time and cost. The Department will continuously analyse user statistics to determine web usage patterns, as well as the path that users take through the site. Regular user surveys will form an integral part of the ongoing evaluation of the site.

20. With a view to making the United Nations web site accessible to all, special measures will continue to be taken to ensure that the site remains available to persons with disabilities. A "text only" path serves pages with no graphics, and is accessible to the blind as well as users whose connection speed is low or whose equipment is not highly sophisticated.

VI. Conclusion

21. Although he is mindful of the request for proposals to enhance United Nations web sites in all official languages of the Organization for the consideration of the Committee on Information at its twenty-third session, keeping in mind modular parity, it is the view of the Secretary-General that it would be a disservice to Member States to continue to develop proposals that entail significant expenditures. At the same time, it is important to reiterate that the achievement of full parity among the official languages will require additional resources. Moreover, policy decisions that will have to be taken with regard to content creation will also entail resource allocations. The present report has thus confined itself to realistic and achievable proposals, some of which are already under way. As noted above, the administrative and budgetary support required to undertake the development, maintenance and enrichment efforts, as outlined in document A/AC.198/2000/7, annex I, continues to be the minimum support necessary for any realistic progress in that regard.

22. The policy decisions outlined above will no doubt lead to an effective implementation of the mandates given to the Department of Public Information with respect to the multilingual development, maintenance and enrichment of United Nations web sites.